



AN OFFERING OF HOPE



Vignettes

DIANE GREENWOOD MUIR



Bellingwood - Book 28



Book Twenty-Eight
Vignettes

DIANE GREENWOOD MUIR

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THANK YOU!

INTRODUCTION

These vignettes originally came about as a way to keep readers engaged while I was writing the next book. Talk about ravenous readers! Each short, short, short story has been published on either the website (nammynools.com) or in the email newsletter that comes out on the twenty-fifth of each month.

I realized how much fun it was to expose little bits of the background stories that happen every day in Bellingwood. Because the Bellingwood books are written from Polly's perspective, unless she is directly involved in the action or with a character, we miss activities in other people's lives. These characters have developed enough that they enjoy telling their own stories, so this is their little bit of fame.

I have compiled the vignettes relating to Book 28 — An Offering of Hope — into one collection. These four short stories feature different characters from Bellingwood who get an opportunity to offer a little slice of life from their own perspective.

Vignette #1

Mama's Family

Jon Renaldi held the front door open for his girlfriend, Chloe Alberts. He understood the shy smile she sent his way. No matter how many times they'd been here for dinner, Chloe still got nervous. His mother was a force to be reckoned with.

A bright, strong woman, Chloe managed large teams and traveled around the world for her company. She cared for her own elderly grandmother, but Mama Renaldi could intimidate the best of them. The thing was? His mother loved Chloe.

Every time he spoke with his mother, she asked if he'd popped the question. At least she hadn't yet stooped to discussing their future children in front of Chloe, not that she hadn't pressured him on that as well.

It didn't help that marriages and babies were happening all over Bellingwood, his mother's favorite place to visit ... online of course. She would never travel there in person, but she kept a close eye on the happenings in that little town. One of her favorite children lived there. Polly Giller would never realize how special she was to Jon's mother.

It wasn't until his mother realized she could keep up with her favorite girl on social media that she cared whether or not she had technology in the house. For years, her big old television had been enough to keep her entertained. Now, she owned a laptop and a tablet. She knew how to use email, and because Polly did it, she'd started shopping online. She even discovered that her favorite supermarket would deliver groceries to her house and had signed up for an account all by herself.

He was pretty sure it hadn't been all by herself. If he asked Polly, he'd probably discover that a girl thirteen hundred miles away had helped her set it up.

"We're here," he called out when they stepped inside. The temperature outside was still in the mid-fifties, but walking into his

childhood home was always like entering a hug. Familiar scents, something wonderful cooking in the kitchen, and the thermostat set to seventy-six degrees. You didn't get very far inside before you had to take off every layer, except what kept you from embarrassing yourself.

His sister, Drea, looked up from the sofa. "Mama wants a dog."

"She wants a what?" he asked with a laugh. He took the box of pastries from Chloe while she removed her coat.

"A dog."

"Why in the world does she want a dog?"

Ray, his older brother, came out from the kitchen. "Because she's worried that one of us is allergic to cats."

"I'm not allergic to cats," Jon said. "None of us are, are we?" He peered at Chloe.

She shrugged. "I'm not."

"We've never had animals in this house before. Why would she think we're allergic? And besides, dogs have dander, too."

"Not if you get one of those poodle mixes." This time it was his mother standing in the doorway to the kitchen. "One of you is taking me to the shelter next weekend. I'm getting a dog."

Jon opened the door to the coat closet. The thing was stuffed full of coats, tablecloths that had been dry-cleaned and draped over hangers, quilts and blankets, boots, scarves, hats. Everything from his childhood was still here. He pushed and shoved until there was room to hang two more coats.

"Why in the world do you want a dog?" he asked. "Do you intend to walk it five times a day?"

"Don't get snippy with me, young man. I raised you better than that. Your Uncle Benny and his son are putting a fence around my back yard. We should have done it years ago." She reached her hand out to Chloe. "Come in, come in, Chloe. Would you like to help me?"

Chloe gave Jon a look. He smiled. "We'll both help, Mama."

"No, just Chloe. You three relax and talk to each other. I want to hear laughter in my living room." Mrs. Renaldi took the box of pastries from Chloe's hands and then put one arm around Chloe's

waist. "How was your day at work, dear?"

"What is that about?" Jon whispered.

"Who knows," Drea said. "I hate both of you, by the way."

Ray laughed. "You could fly to Iowa with us this weekend. You know you're always invited. Polly would love to see you."

"I can't leave this weekend. Why couldn't it have been last week or the next week?"

Jon looked at the floor. "Because this is the only weekend Chloe could go."

Drea shot a glance at the wall between the living room and the kitchen. "Then she deserves whatever she's getting out there. I can't believe you're going to make me take Mama to the shelter to pick out a dog. Neither one of us knows a thing about animals."

"Mama knows plenty by now. She's peppered Polly with questions. What do you want to bet she has a shipment of toys, treats, dog beds, and dog food coming in by Friday," Ray said.

"I still can't believe you're making me do this without you."

"Tell her you're busy," Jon said. "It doesn't have to happen this weekend."

Ray laughed out loud. "This is Mama. You know how she is. She gets something in her head and no one will talk her out of it. If she wants a dog, it'll happen as soon as possible."

Jon sat on the edge of his seat, barely listening to his sister and brother. He was more concerned with what was happening in the other room. Chloe and his mother had never spent time alone. Not even for a minute.

"Jon?"

He looked at Drea. "What?"

"When are you telling Mama that you're going to Bellingwood this weekend?"

"Tonight. Why?"

"And Ray?" she asked.

"Tonight. What's the big deal? We travel all the time."

"Not to see Polly. You haven't given Mama any time to make presents or plan her questions."

Jon shook his head. "She doesn't need us to ask questions for her

any longer. She follows everyone in town on social media. And she already has presents made. Mama knows that my trips come up without notice."

"Have you seen her book?" Drea shot a furtive glance to the doorway and slid her hand to the lower shelf of the table beside her mother's chair.

The chair had been recovered three times in Jon's memory and it needed to be restored again. Maybe the three of them could do that as a Christmas gift this year. The seat cushion was flat and the fabric worn. His mother had pinned doilies to the arms and the back where she rested her head.

The chair would always be a cherished memory. Every evening after they cleaned up the dinner dishes, his mother sat in the living room with them and begged her children to talk to each other, to make each other laugh as they told stories about their week. She'd lean back, close her eyes, and smile as she listened. She never interrupted, they had plenty to say. It was enough that they were in her living room and including her in their lives.

That was what she did with Polly and her Bellingwood family. She never interrupted or intruded. She just wanted to be part of the lives of people she cared about, even if it was from thirteen hundred miles away.

Drea pulled out an old cloth-covered denim blue three-ring binder. She held it up so he could see his name inked in the bottom right corner. That's what he thought. The papers he'd once kept inside the binder were likely tucked neatly away in a well-labeled box down in the basement. The three of them dreaded the day they had to dig through this house without their mother.

Ray had once asked if they could clear any of their old things out and she'd told them that unless they were planning to store them in their own homes, she was keeping everything intact. Someday they'd be happy she did.

He doubted it.

Jon and his brother moved to sit beside Drea as she opened the binder. His mother had printed a color photograph of Sycamore House with the garden and the Bellingwood sign in the center and

slid it into a plastic cover. Tabbed dividers were neatly labeled. Polly's family. Polly's friends. Businesses. Law Enforcement. On and on.

Jon chuckled and slid his finger behind that last tab, opening it to reveal detailed information on Aaron Merritt. The first reference was to the sheriff's wife and the reference sent them to the tab labeled Polly's friends. He read a description of Aaron's sister from Atlanta, and then through a list of the deputies who worked with him. Each deputy had his or her own page. Bellingwood Police Chief Ken Wallers was the next major entry. There was even a detailed page on his day-time dispatcher - Mindy. Jon wondered if his mother had ever heard Mindy's last name. If she had, it would be written down.

"This is incredible," he whispered. "What do you think Polly would say if she knew Mama had this?"

Drea chuckled. "Don't you dare tell her. It would scare her to death. Mama will never put this in the computer either because she's afraid someone might steal the information and expose Polly and her friends to the world. So, we have this."

"Put it away," Ray whispered. "Hurry." He stood up and walked to the doorway. "How long until dinner, Mama?"

"Six thirty, just like always," came the response. "You boys let Drea put my Bellingwood book back where it came from and set the table."

Drea blinked. "Eyes in the back of her head."

Jon popped up and grinned down at his sister. "You're in trouble. You're in trouble," he sang, then jumped when she swatted his behind with the heavy binder.

Ray was already carrying dishes to the dining room table, so Jon took wine and water glasses out of the sideboard. They'd done this together since they were old enough to reach the table top.

"What's for dinner tonight, Mama?" Ray asked.

"Round steak parmesan. I felt like something warm and comforting would make a good meal for my family. It's getting colder outside."

Jon walked into the kitchen and looked around for Chloe. She

was nowhere to be found. "Your meals are always warm and comforting, Mama. Where's Chloe?"

"Don't you worry about her. She's just fine."

He frowned. "What did you do with her?"

His mother swatted him with a wooden spoon. "What did I just say to you?"

"She's fine?"

"Take the garlic bread out of the oven. The basket is on the counter there."

Drea came in and headed for the stove top. "Pasta finished, Mama?"

"Yes, dear."

The four of them finished setting dinner on the table and when Jon turned to ask about Chloe again, his mother was gone.

"Where did she go now?" he asked out loud.

His mother came back into the kitchen from the three-season room. He should have checked there. Chloe followed, her arms overflowing with quilts and shopping bags.

"What is this?" he asked.

"Your mother has been sewing and crocheting," Chloe said. "A couple of these bags are going to Bellingwood with us, but Jon, you have to see this quilt she made for ..." She hesitated.

His mother stepped between them. "It's for Chloe now, but hopefully someday, the two of you will share a bed. I finally know her well enough to know her favorite colors and designs." She shoved Jon's elbow as she walked past him. "Take the bundles from her arms and put them on the sofa in the living room. How long must I wait before I start making shower and wedding gifts?"

This was the first time she'd ever challenged him in front of Chloe. He looked at his girlfriend sheepishly and she grinned.

"Yes, Jon. How long?"

Vignette #2

Big Dreams

Ella Evans leaned back, stretched, and yawned. "I can't read another word. We have to go do something."

"What do you want to do?" Heath asked. "I've got hours of work ahead of me."

"Take me for a ride. Anything. I need oxygen." Ella smiled. "And maybe a milkshake. Come on. We won't be gone long. Take me to Boone for ice cream." She shook her head and snagged her coat. "If you don't take me, I'm stealing your truck and I'll go by myself."

Heath scowled at the pile of books in front of him, then checked his phone for the time. They'd been working for two hours. Where had the time gone? He slammed the top book closed, stood, and grabbed his coat. "I am never going to be ready for mid-terms. Never."

"You're ready now," she said. "Quit worrying. You know this stuff."

"But ..."

"No buts. Come on. I'll tell Mom we're leaving for a while. We have to eat."

"Fine, but when we get back, you have to let me focus."

Ella pulled her coat on. "Have I been distracting you?"

"You always distract me."

"Go warm up the truck. I'll be right out."

Heath watched her walk away, yelling for her mother. How in the world had he gotten so lucky? She was so freakin' cute and she couldn't understand why he had trouble focusing. Hah. He headed for the front door, patting his coat pockets. He took his keys out of the right pocket, exactly where they always were and walked to the truck. How was this even his life? He had a girlfriend, he had a great home, he had a job, he was a junior in college, and when he was finished, he had a guaranteed career with Henry Sturtz. How could this be real? He didn't deserve it.

Polly would tell him that he did — that he'd suffered enough those years after his parents died. Deep down, he didn't believe her. For so long, he knew for certain that he must have been an awful kid for so many bad things to have happened during those years.

He turned the truck on and shivered as the fan blew cold air at him. "Come on, come on," he said, turning the knob up a few more degrees. "Warm up. She'll be here any second." He kept an eagle eye on the house. He wanted her to go slowly enough that the truck would get warm first, but at the same time, he couldn't wait to see her come bouncing out of the house.

That's just who Ella was. She had more energy than anyone he knew. Except Polly. Ella's energy came across as exuberance and joy. Polly's was hard work and love. Ella loved him. He knew that. She told him that she loved him every once in a while and it blew his mind. He'd never do anything to hurt her. If Ella Evans was going to love him, he was going to earn it every day.

The front door opened, light streaming out around her. She waved at him, pulled the door closed, and ran across the lawn. No, he wasn't going to get out and open the door for her. He'd done so a couple of times in the early days of their relationship and she'd let him know that she was strong enough to open her own door. She did let him open doors into buildings. He'd explained that it was expected and he didn't want people think he was a chauvinist pig. They compromised.

She climbed up and into the truck, pulled her seatbelt on, and stuck her hands in front of the vents. "No heat yet? It's cold out."

"Sorry."

"Don't apologize. You can't control the weather. Once you start driving, your truck will warm up. Mom told me to put my gloves on. Did I listen? Nope. Where are we going?"

"You said you wanted ice cream."

"I really just wanted to get out of the house."

"So where am I going?"

"Onward, Jeeves." Ella pointed south. "We'll find something interesting. Mom's making split pea soup for dinner." She put her finger in her mouth and gagged. "We can do better than split pea,

can't we?"

"I like her soup."

She reached over and patted his arm. "I told her to save some for you. You'll be hungry again before we finish studying." Ella leaned forward and looked up at the sky. "Stars are bright tonight. Did you ever go camping as a kid?"

"When we were little. Did you?"

"No. I always thought it would be cool to sleep under the stars." She sat back. "As long as I don't have to worry about coyotes."

"I used to see them by the creek at Sycamore House every once in a while. Polly said Obiwan got caught in a coyote trap once."

"Mom told us about it," Ella said, nodding. "I remember that. Did you ever think about it? That you were living so close to wildlife?"

"Not really. And the town is growing up so much down there, I'll bet coyotes don't come that far in now."

"Yeah, I guess." Ella's voice trailed off. "Do you think about that time very much?"

"What time?"

"When Polly made you come live with her?"

He huffed a short laugh. "Yeah. I do. Sometimes I can't believe everything that's happened. I can't believe you happened."

"Dad says I'm a force of nature."

"He's not wrong."

"Do you think Polly has it right?"

"What do you mean?"

"That rescuing people is a good way to live?"

"It's not a bad way to live."

"If we were married, would you help me rescue people?"

"Sure," he said. "That would be okay. But you're going to be a veterinarian. We'll probably rescue animals."

"When I was a little girl, I told Mom that I wanted to own a hundred acres of land and turn it all into an animal rescue. I was going to have dogs and goats, lots of cats, maybe some horses. But they were all going to have plenty of room to run and be free."

"We could do that. Mrs. Johnson has a bunch of rescue animals out at her stables. Polly's horses and donkeys were rescues."

"I know. That's so cool. I wanted to call it Evans' Heaven."

"You should do that."

Ella reached forward and turned the heat down. "Are you warm enough?"

"Yeah. I was going to have to open the window pretty soon."

"You should have said something."

He put his hand out on the console. After being with Polly and Henry so long, it seemed natural. She placed her still-cold hand in his.

"Your hand is so warm," she said. "If we had a big rescue, we'd need people to help care for the animals. We could build a big house and if someone needed a place to live, they could come and work as long as they wanted. We could pay them something and give them room and board. It would be a safe place. Animals would feel safe. People would feel safe." Ella squeezed his fingers. "You make me feel safe. Do you know that?"

Heath could barely speak. If he opened his mouth, she'd know how close he was to crying. "You too," he choked out.

She leaned back in the seat, and looked up at the sky through the passenger window. "On warm summer evenings, we could put a tent up and sleep outside with the animals." Ella laughed. "Can't you just see one of the goats trying to push the tent over with its head? Butting us awake in the morning? Or a donkey trying to shove its way inside so it could find you? You know, because you're its favorite human in the world. It isn't fair, but you always have treats in your pocket."

When Heath didn't say anything, she turned toward him. "I'm sorry. Am I freaking you out?"

He smiled at her and shook his head.

"I am, though, aren't I. Here I am talking like we're going to be together forever and we haven't even been dating that long. Don't mind me. I was just babbling."

"Do you think about it?"

Ella shrugged. "Getting married and being with someone forever? Doesn't every girl my age? I mean, I'm not going to live with my parents for the rest of my life. If it isn't you, then I guess I

can look for an apartment in town and live by myself until I'm an old maid. Maybe I'll start the rescue anyway. The animals will feel sorry for me because I'm so lonely. The love of my life drifted away and left me to fend for myself."

"Now you sound like Rebecca and Cilla. They get dramatic over every little thing."

"Duh. They're girls that hang out with dumb boys who don't know how to take a hint."

"What hint?" Heath gave a pained chuckle. He really was a dumb boy. "What did I miss?"

"You were supposed to assure me that I wasn't freaking you out and that sometimes you think about us being together forever. It isn't like I'm asking you to marry me or anything. Just dream with me a little bit."

"About rescuing people and animals?"

"About doing that with me."

"I wouldn't want to do it with anyone else."

Ella dropped her head forward and sighed. "Useless. You're absolutely useless. If my dad wasn't as useless as you, I wouldn't know how to handle it. As it is, I've had years of training."

"What did you want me to say?"

"I don't know. Something along the lines of, 'Yes, Ella, I dream about spending my life with you, too. Whatever we do together will be perfect. If we have to live in a mud hut because we don't have any money, I'd choose to do that with you. If we live in a beautiful mansion, you're the only person I would want to be with.'"

"That's what I said."

"No, you said you wouldn't want to rescue people and animals with anyone else."

"I wouldn't." He sent her a grin. "Now I'm just being obstinate." Heath turned into a parking lot and found a space far away from anyone else, then parked the truck. He turned in his seat. "Yes. I think about us having a future together. If it's a mud hut or a mansion, I'd be glad to do it all with you."

"But?"

"But nothing." He shrugged. "Okay, but I don't want to do what

Hayden and Cat are doing."

"Starting their lives together?"

"Stop it. You know what I mean. I'm not about to move you into Polly and Henry's house. When we're ready to get married ..."

"So you want to marry me?"

"When we're ready for whatever comes our way, I want to be able to afford our own place. I don't care if it's an apartment or what. I'd like to live in Bellingwood, but we can talk about the details when it's more real. You need to finish college. I need to finish college. When I start working full-time, I'm moving out. I haven't talked to Polly and Henry about this yet. She's totally going to flip her lid. Every time she thinks about one of us leaving, she gets this pathetic look on her face like she's going to cry."

"She really loves you, doesn't she."

"Yeah. She does. But I still have two years with her. And it isn't even like I'll move very far away."

"She probably likes knowing that you're safe under her roof. That's what Dad always says to me and Barrett. You know I'm going to be in school forever, right?"

"Yeah, but you should at least finish your undergrad, don't you think?"

"And then we can talk about our future?"

Heath took her hand back. "We can talk about our future any time. We can't do anything about it until I graduate. Deal?"

"You're being way too responsible."

"A burger and a shake responsible?"

"Will you go through the drive-thru? The truck is so warm. I don't want to get out and go inside."

Heath pushed back the ceiling liner to expose the window. "Then we'll drive back out into the country and look at the stars."

"You'll do," she said and leaned over to kiss his cheek. "I'm not going to cook split pea soup for you after we're married, though."

"I'll dream about a future of cooking it for you," he retorted with a grin.

Vignette #3

Holiday Helpers

"She did it again, sir."

The big man stopped in his tracks. "Who did, Ginger?"

"Polly Giller. That's seven years in a row she's helped more people than anyone thought possible." The tiny girl with bright red hair pointed at a chart on the wall. "We should do something extra nice for her, don't you think?"

He smiled. "Ms. Giller would tell you that it's not necessary. She'd rather we spend her extra on someone who needs it."

Ginger's shoulders drooped. "Not even a little something extra? Polly is always taking care of people. Somebody should take care of her. Especially at Christmas."

"Look up these names," the big man said, pulling a list from his pocket. The endless strip of paper unrolled, revealing name after name.

"Who are these people?" Ginger asked.

"Go ahead. Look them up in your book."

She scampered over to an immense book — bigger than she was by far. In it were the names of every person on earth. Ginger found that she could get lost in the magic of the book. She loved watching the names change. Her favorite thing to see was when a brand new page suddenly appeared with the birth of a new baby. Colored with love and light, it was filled with potential. There was nothing more fun than to see the interesting names that parents used for their children. She remembered the days of Hezekiahs and Mehetabels. Andrew, Noah, and Rebecca might be names that had stood the test of time, but they were so much easier to say out loud.

The first name on the list in front of her was Lydia Merritt. She was another of Ginger's favorite people. Whenever anyone in Bellingwood faced a difficult time, whether it be joyous or stressful, Mrs. Merritt was right there with a casserole and a kind word.

"She had a party and gave Polly an evening with no

responsibilities," Ginger said. "That was nice of her."

He nodded and gestured for her to continue.

"This one's a cutie pie," Ginger said. "Heath Harvey." She craned her neck. "Hey, Charlie. Is Heath Harvey still your responsibility?"

Charlie skipped across the room, darting in and out of piles of boxes that were yet to be wrapped. "Tell me he's still okay. He's in love with Ella Evans. I just checked on him yesterday. This close to Christmas he shouldn't have had time to mess up."

"He's doing fine," Ginger said, pointing at the list. "He's on here as a helper for Polly Giller."

Charlie nodded, a slow grin creeping across his face. "Heath is just learning that helping someone who takes responsibility for caring for others is important. I have high hopes for his future. Is his brother on that list? Hayden?"

Ginger ticked down the names and tapped the paper. "There it is. Hayden Harvey." She flipped another page in the book and wrapped her arms around Charlie's neck. "He does a lot for Polly. Look at this. He makes breakfast for the boys. And he's even helpful to his wonderful wife. Which of us do you think will be made responsible for their new baby?"

Charlie stood up straight and brushed fingers through his dark, curly hair. "I've already spoken for the little ..." He looked up and winked at the big man. "I almost gave away their secret, didn't I?"

"And here I thought I'd get some inside information on whether it's a boy or a girl," Ginger said. "Let's see who's next on the list. Oh, yes." She closed her eyes, lifted her shoulders to her ears and smiled contentedly. "One of my favorite girls. I wish she was mine, but at least Twinkle gets to have some fun. Oh, Twinkle!"

A very short, dark-skinned, raven-haired beauty with flashing black eyes popped out from under the big table.

"What were you doing under there?"

Twinkle held up an empty leash. "Benjamin Dearford's puppy got away from me. Those two are going to be trouble, let me tell you. I hope you're going to make sure that his mama gets a stocking full of patience and love. She'll need all of it and so much more. Who are you talking about?"

Ginger flipped another page in the book and looked to see her friends beaming at her. "Another one of Polly Giller's helpers. Her daughter, Rebecca."

Twinkle climbed up a stool and sat on the edge of the desk beside the book. She pointed at the page. "Do you see how long it's been since she had to clean a bathroom? She figured out that her family needed her to grow up and she did it. I've been so proud of her this year. There's another person on that list who's my responsibility." Twinkle's eyes glistened with tears. "I knew that she was going to end up having a wonderful life, but after so many years of being lonely, even I began to wonder."

"You never gave up, though, did you?" Charlie asked. He patted her leg.

"That's what the big guy always tells us when the new year begins," Ginger said. "Never give up. Every single person in this book has the capacity to love and care for someone else. Sometimes all they need is for the right catalyst to be set in front of them. That, and a little love and compassion."

"But who knew that my Agnes was going to have to trip and fall into a hedge so that she'd get to live the next part of her life to its fullest?" Twinkle said. "I felt so guilty, even though I knew it had to be done."

A tall, lanky boy strode over to join the little group. "I didn't think my little Cassidy was ever going to speak up. Especially when it was so important." He bumped Twinkle's arm. "But it all worked out that day, didn't it? And now, look. Both of them are living wonderful lives. And see how your Agnes is taking care of both Cassidy and Polly? She makes it easier for Ginger's Polly to take care of everybody. That's the way it's supposed to work."

As Ginger continued down through the list, more of her co-workers gathered around the book, proud to talk about how their person had grown while helping Polly Giller take care of people. Quite a few had met Polly because she intervened in their lives and offered them hope. The best part was that these people grew into their best lives by reaching out to someone else who needed a little extra help. They discovered what Polly already knew. Happiness

comes when you're thinking of others, not yourself.

Ginger jumped when she felt a poke in her ribs. She turned to see a roly-poly woman who wore a tall hat and wide shoulder pads. "Sparkle, you found us."

"Word's going around the warehouse," Sparkle said. "Talking about that Polly Giller, are you?"

"Mostly her helpers," Ginger replied. "I just got to your person. He's her biggest helper."

The woman's eyes sparkled with tears. Charlie reached over to brush one off her cheek. It hardened in his palm, and much like a diamond, it reflected light into a spectrum of color. One of Sparkle's tears was quite a prize, though as often as she got emotional, everyone had a nice-sized collection of them.

"Henry Sturtz captured my heart when he was only a little boy." She turned to the big man smiling down at her. "You gave me a gift the day I was assigned to him. But the day that he met Polly Giller was the beginning of the best years of his life. He learned how to take care of people without reservation."

"He had some tough lessons," Ginger said with a smile.

Sparkle shrugged and grinned. "I never said he wasn't stubborn or strong-willed. Once he realized how much joy was found in helping others, he never wanted to stop. The best part is, since he's so busy, he takes joy when his wife helps others. He makes it easier for Polly to do what she does."

A young boy walked over to the group. Shy and reserved, he stood quietly until Ginger noticed him.

"I don't know your name," she said. "I'm Ginger. Do you have responsibility for someone who helps Polly Giller?" Ginger peered at the list. It had rolled out of the big guy's pocket, but there were names that hadn't yet been revealed. "Sir? May I see the rest of the list?"

He shook his head and put his hand on the boy's shoulder. "This is Jingle. He's about to become part of this special group. Every one of you are very special, and because of Polly Giller, you've become friends. Isn't that terrific? You're going to like your new friends, Jingle. And as for the list, it's only the beginning. There are many

names on here that you might not see for years, but they're coming." With a snap of his thumb and finger, the strip of paper rolled itself back up and slid down deep into the pocket of his red velvet jacket.

"Nicholas? Nicholas!" A cheery woman with bright red cheeks, silver-rimmed glasses, and a glittering smile came across the room. "This is where you've all gotten to. What did you discover today?"

"That we don't have to take responsibility for someone like Polly Giller," Ginger said. "Her friends have done our job for us."

"Isn't that a wonderful lesson," the woman said. She slipped her hand into her husband's. "Just like what's been going on out on the floor, isn't it? While you were busy learning, your friends made sure that your tasks were kept on target."

Ginger looked at the woman in surprise. "I'm sorry. We should get back to work right away."

"No, no, no, dear. Don't be sorry. You all had something special to talk about today. No one has been put out. It's part of what we do."

"But we really should get back to work," Twinkle said. "Now, where is that puppy?"

The woman opened a satchel she'd carried over and a small white fluffy puppy popped its head up, its tongue lolling out in pure pleasure.

"Thank you, Mrs. Claus," Twinkle said. She held the leash out and the puppy jumped into her arms, the leash wrapping itself around the dog's neck. "I'm going to have to keep my eye on you. Benjamin is going to have so much fun."

As the elves hurried back to their tasks, the woman smiled up at her husband. "Christmas is nearly upon us. The reindeer are growing impatient. I wonder if you might take some carrots out tonight and regale them with stories of past Christmases. They should have a good night's sleep before the long trip."

"You think of everything, my dear," Nicholas said.

"Someone has to help the helpers. Wasn't that the lesson for today?"

Santa Claus squeezed his wonderful wife. It was just like her to remind him of the important things.

Vignette #4

Movin' On Up

"Where is everyone?" Henry asked his father.

"Gone for lunch. I kicked 'em out." Bill Sturtz waggled his hand at Henry. "Give it up, son."

Henry held up a plastic bag. "Mom leaves for one day and you send me out to pick up barbecue?"

"She has to go away. It's the only time I can get away with it."

"We could have met at the restaurant for lunch."

"It's not safe. Someone might see me and tell your mother where I was."

Henry laughed out loud. "Do you really think you can hide from her? Besides, she isn't that mean."

"You'd be surprised," Bill said, a frown creasing his forehead. "That woman thinks she's my boss. Does she not remember that it's my name on that sign out there?"

"Mom took your name when the two of you got married," Henry said. "She knows more about your business than you do."

Bill snatched the plastic bag from Smoking Hot Stuff out of Henry's hands and sat down at a workbench. He ripped the bag open and popped the top on the first meal. "Brisket. That's yours. I want my ribs. Tell me you got cheesy potatoes."

"You're the one who placed the order, Dad. All I am is the delivery boy."

"There better be a thing of cheesy potatoes in here," Bill muttered as he took the other meal out of the bag. Setting the container down on the work table, he popped it open and sighed. "Ahh, that's what I'm talking about."

After Bill's two heart attacks, Marie transformed his diet. She'd been terrified at the thought of losing her best friend and kept that man on the straight and narrow. For the most part. She also knew when he needed a break from her tyranny. Before she left this morning, she'd called Henry, telling him that he didn't have to feel guilty about picking up lunch from Smoking Hot Stuff. She would

adjust Bill's dinner menu tonight.

When he asked how she knew, she'd laughed and told him that she had her ways. Then she admitted that Bill left the laptop open to their website. He'd also scratched the phone number on a note. He thought he was being sneaky, but in truth, the man couldn't get away with anything. He just didn't have it in him.

Bill wiped his fingers on a shop rag, then leaned back and snagged a set of blueprints from the counter behind him. "Been looking at these with your mother. What would you think about building the basement out as an apartment?"

"Why would you do that, Dad?"

"We're getting older. What if we need someone to move in and keep an eye on us?"

Henry laughed. "Exactly who do you think that will be?"

"Maybe little Cassidy. She's a good girl. By the time she's a young adult, we might need extra help. But, seriously, Henry, I want to put the train setup on the main level."

"Mom's okay with that?"

Bill sat up straight. "This is my house. I can do whatever I want."

"Uh huh."

"No. She wants me to build a shed for the train set. She says that your kids get to sleep in the bedrooms upstairs. But we do want to build out the basement. Lonnie and Dave should have a place to stay when they come visit."

"That's easy. You know that."

"We want Polly to pick out the colors and carpet. Will you ask her?"

"Of course I will, but Mom has good taste."

Bill flattened his lips and shook his head. "She says that she'll be busy enough trying to figure out how to decorate the main floor and then decide on landscaping. I told her to ask Judy Greene to help with the landscaping, but Marie wants to do it. Would you believe that woman wants a garden? A vegetable garden? She's going to have me out pulling weeds all summer. Doesn't she know that I'm a busy man? I have a business to run."

"You're telling the wrong person, Dad." Henry looked at his

father with a grin. "Tell Mom what you think about making you garden."

"And have her put me in solitary confinement?" Bill looked aghast. "Your mother is mean."

"Why did you marry her, then?"

"She snookered me," Bill said. "She batted those pretty eyes at me, told me that I was wonderful, and before I knew it, we were married and had two kids. Then, in the next heartbeat, there are in-laws and grandkids and I don't know what else will show up. All because I couldn't resist those eyes."

"And you've been miserable ever since."

"I knew you'd understand. You live the same rough life," Bill said. "That wife of yours isn't much better."

"It's a tragedy." Henry pointed at the blueprints. "Mom doesn't want a room upstairs for herself?"

"To do what?"

Henry scowled at his father. "I don't know. Sewing, crafting, gift wrapping, hiding things from you."

"She can use one of the bedrooms. You and I both know she'd rather have space for kids to spend the night than anything else."

Henry remembered spending the night at his grandmother's house. Elva Johnson and her family lived there now. He hoped her kids enjoyed it as much as he had. But then, it had never been about the house itself. No, the true joy came from the love his grandmother infused in everything she did with him, even hanging laundry on the line out back.

"What are you smiling about?"

"Grandma. I was just thinking about how you and Mom made sure that Lonnie and I always brought our dirty sheets downstairs before we left so Grandma didn't have to go upstairs. And that's when I learned how to scrub a bathtub and clean a toilet. Mom insisted that it was spotless because making Grandma clomp up those steps to clean up after us was almost a sin."

"When she got older, she let Lonnie sleep in the office outside her bedroom," Bill said. "That way no one had to go upstairs except Loren. I'm sure glad that house is filled with children again." He

gestured over his shoulder in the direction of his house. "This old place needs to have children living in it again. Little Molly keeps things lively, but she's going to be in school one of these days. That house was made for a family. I thought it was going to be your family, but you outgrew it before you got a chance to live there."

"It was always your house, Dad."

"Well, it's yours now. You get to figure out what to do with it."

"Are there any big problems that we should address once you move out?"

Bill chuckled. "You mean like the slow drain in the upstairs bathroom or replacing the windows on the main floor? What about the carpet on the steps going upstairs and the rickety stairs from the outside entrance to the basement?"

"Those are all small problems." Henry pursed his lips. "Except maybe the windows. But everything else can be fixed. Why don't you call someone about the drain upstairs?"

"Tried to run a snake. Didn't work."

Henry leaned forward. "Call Liam. He'll fix it."

"He'll tell me that we have to take the whole thing out and replace the pipes. I'm spending my money on a new house. This place will be your problem."

"Do you want me to call Liam?"

"No," Bill said, shaking his head. "It's not that bad. Wait until we move out, then you can hire me to come back and do the work. If you're going to rent the place, we might want to bring Jerry Adams in and re-do the wiring in the kitchen. Bring it up-to-date. People these days use more small appliances than Marie."

"That's a good idea. Anything else?"

Bill huffed a sigh, then tapped the blueprints. "Your mother and I are excited about a new house. Especially having everything on one level. It will be nice to be close to Betty and Dick, too."

"But?"

"When we moved back from Arizona, I was happy to be in that old place again. That house was our home. We made a lifetime's worth of memories there. The marks from you and Lonnie getting taller are still upstairs. Do you remember running head first into

the wall in your bedroom? That was quite some dent you made."

"That was Lonnie's fault," Henry said.

"I know, I know. And I remember her sneaking her friends in through the basement because she'd told them they could spend the night, but she hadn't asked her mother." Bill smiled. "Birthday parties and graduation parties. School pictures in front of the house with the two of you all dressed up in your new clothes. Christmas in the living room. Your mother still pulls picture albums out so we can smile at the memories. It's going to be hard to leave the old place and know I'm never going back."

"You don't have to move, Dad. There's nothing written in stone."

"Yes we do. A man can't sit around and mope for the olden days. The past and its memories are old friends, but if you don't move forward, you won't make new memories. It's time to go forward. Right?"

"Only if you're ready."

"Marie says I'm ready, so I guess I am." Bill grinned and shrugged. "Listen to me sounding all gloomy and pessimistic. You should knock that right out of me."

Henry's phone rang. "It's Polly. Wonder what she wants?"

"You have to answer it to find out."

"You doing okay with all this?" Henry asked, his finger hovering over the green button while he nodded at the blueprints.

"With moving? Of course I am. It's going to be hard work, but that's never stopped a Sturtz. Answer the phone."

Henry tapped it open and said, "Hey, Polly Wolly Doodle Bug."

"No," Polly replied. "I thought we'd gotten past those terms of endearment."

"I can always hope that I can come up with one that will stick. What's up?"

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*(Turn the page for links and more information.*

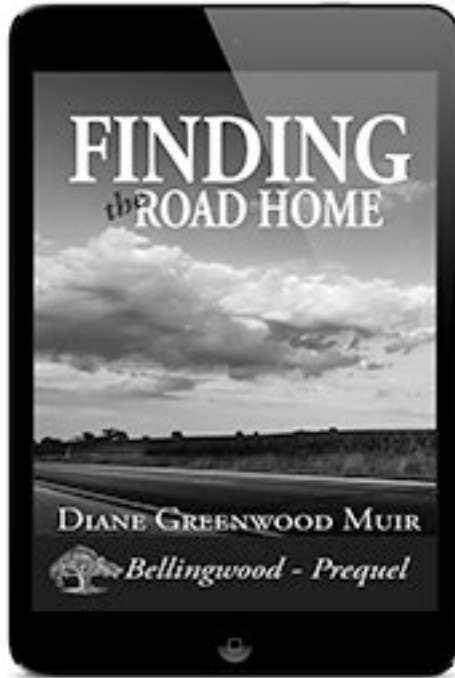
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## THANK YOU!



I'm so glad you enjoy these stories about Polly Giller and her friends. There are many ways to stay in touch with Diane and the Bellingwood community.

You can find more details about Sycamore House and Bellingwood at the website: <http://nammynools.com/>

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for news about upcoming books, conversations while I'm writing and you're reading, and a continued look at life in a small town. Diane Greenwood Muir's [Amazon Author Page](#) is a great place to watch for new releases.

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